

*A publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network*

# Veterans First

Issue 2 • 2005

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*Our outpatient clinics are another way we bring our health care into the community, making it possible for you to receive VA care closer to home.*

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Veteran and transplant patient Mike Reyna reviews his CAT scan results with Physician Assistant Lisa Tickerhoof.

PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

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Veteran Arthur Thomson undergoing a carotid duplex ultrasound.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PHILADELPHIA VA MEDICAL CENTER

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Veteran Ralph Romano being examined by Dr. John Duda.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE PHILADELPHIA VA MEDICAL CENTER

*Veterans First* is a health care publication of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network. The publication is intended to provide information to help you stay well, manage your health care, and learn about health services available through VA. It is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, which should be obtained from your doctor.

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# A MESSAGE FROM THE DIRECTOR

## Expanding Our Services to Meet Your Health Care Needs

Dear Veterans,

**O**ne part of providing health care of the highest quality to you — the veterans of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network — is to be sure the health care that we provide meets your needs and is easily available to you.

To that end, we recently expanded our services to include an additional program for homeless women veterans and more community-based outpatient clinics.

On the campus of the VA medical center in Coatesville, Pa., a program for homeless women veterans was expanded to provide transitional housing for women suffering from mental health

issues or substance abuse. Operated in cooperation with our community partner, the Philadelphia Veterans Multiservice & Education Center, the 30-bed program (located in the Walker House) helps these women recover and return to the community.

Our outpatient clinics are another way we bring our health care into the community, making it possible for you to receive VA care closer to home. Since the beginning of the year, several clinics have been established or expanded:

- The Veterans Health Clinic at Gloucester County (New Jersey) has expanded its operation from three days a week to five days.
- New clinics have opened in Bangor (Northampton County), Pa.; Uniontown (Fayette County), Pa.; Warren (Warren County), Pa.; and Oil City (Venango County), Pa.

These are just two of the ways that we reach out to veterans who may be in need of our care, but can't easily get to a VA medical center. As always, we will continue to look for ways to improve the health care we provide to the men and women who have served our country.

My best wishes to you and your families for a healthy summer.



Charleen R. Szabo, FACHE  
Network Director



*Ms. Szabo (third from left) at the ribbon cutting for the Walker House with Deputy Secretary of Veterans Affairs, The Honorable Gordon H. Mansfield (front), and other dignitaries.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF COATESVILLE VA MEDICAL CENTER



# VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System's Transplant Center: *A Place of New Beginnings*

**F**or veterans needing a new liver or kidney, it would be hard to find better medical care anywhere else in the country than what is available through the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System (VAPHS) transplant program.

Beginning with the veteran's first visit, the transplant center's health care team follows the patient through the transplant process and afterwards for the rest of the veteran's life. "When veterans are referred to the center by their primary care providers, they are immediately assigned a transplant coordinator who manages every aspect of their care throughout the transplant process," says Ivonne Daly, M.D., one of two transplant surgeons at the center. The coordinator is available to the veteran not only during medical visits, but also any time the veteran has a health concern— 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

While the transplant center may be seen as a last resort for some veterans with end-stage liver or kidney disease, the health care team there prefers to think of it as a place of new beginnings. "The whole team is devoted to the

patient," says Dr. Daly. "We give them a second chance to live."

According to Dr. Daly, in 2004 the center received a charter from the United Network for Organ Sharing, the national organization that coordinates organ

matching and placement throughout the country. The charter makes it possible for the center to receive donated organs and means it is now the only independent, in-house transplant center in the entire nationwide VA system. Previously, the center shared a charter with the University of Pittsburgh.

Dr. Daly says they would like to perform 40 to 50 liver transplants per year, and to increase substantially the number of kidney transplants, including living donations. Last year 42 liver transplants and 11 kidney transplants were performed. The transplant center primarily serves veterans in the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network, but also gets referrals from around the country.

To learn more about the VAPHS transplant program, talk to your primary care provider, or call the transplant center at 412-688-6155.



*Physician Assistant Lisa Tickerhoof and veteran Mike Reyna discussing his test results.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

## *One Soldier's Experience*



PHOTO COURTESY OF VA PITTSBURGH HEALTHCARE SYSTEM

**I**n 1994, Vietnam War era Army veteran Michael Reyna was diagnosed with a serious liver disorder. Three years later, with his condition deteriorating, Reyna moved his wife, Denise, and their two sons from Texas closer to Denise's family in Pittsburgh. That was when Reyna turned to the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System's liver clinic for help and was placed on a waiting list to receive a liver transplant.

On April 6, 2003, Reyna received a new liver at the VAPHS transplant center. It changed his life. "It was a great thing that happened to me," says Reyna, who before the transplant didn't have the energy to be on his feet for more than five minutes at a time without taking a rest.

Reyna has only praise for the care he received at VA. "I couldn't have had better care anywhere. They treated me like I was the only patient they had."

*Mike Reyna with his sons Jordan (age 9) and Dylan (age 8)*

# Decreasing Your Risk of Developing Vascular Disease

**Once referred to as “hardening of the arteries,” vascular disease, in its various forms, is more common than many people think.**

Exactly what is vascular disease? The term refers to a variety of diseases that affect the blood vessels. The most commonly known of these occurs when a buildup of fatty deposits causes a narrowing of the channel through which blood flows to the brain, heart, kidneys, stomach, arms, legs, and feet.

It's well known that vascular disease can cause heart attack and stroke, but it can also lead to leg and foot amputations, impotence, dementia, and diseases of the kidneys and stomach. In its early stages, symptoms of the disease can include aching and cramping in the legs and hips, angina (chest pain or discomfort), or mini-strokes. These are warning signs of more serious conditions that might follow if steps aren't taken to control the factors that can lead to the disease.

According to Michael Golden, M.D., chief of vascular surgery at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, the risk of developing vascular disease increases with age, but at any age, you're more likely to develop it if you:

- ☑ smoke;
- ☑ have high blood pressure;
- ☑ have diabetes;
- ☑ have elevated LDL (bad) cholesterol levels.

Like the general population, many veterans are at high risk to get some form of vascular disease. In 2004, it is estimated that more than one-third of patients admitted to a VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network medical center were there because of vascular problems

resulting mainly from age, current or past tobacco use, or both.

The good news, says Dr. Golden, is that *if the risk factors of vascular disease are controlled, the chance of developing complications is reduced.* “Decreasing your risk can help improve your quality of life,” he says.

The first place to start is with a visit to your VA primary care provider. He or she will identify your risk factors and discuss how you can make changes that will decrease your chance of developing vascular disease. “First of all, if you smoke, you should stop,” says Dr. David Macpherson, primary care provider and chairperson of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network's Primary Care Committee. “Smoking is the only curable factor; all of the others can only be controlled.” For high

blood pressure, cholesterol levels, and blood glucose levels, Macpherson recommends striving to stay below the levels recommended by your VA provider.

After your risk factors are under control, the accumulation of fatty deposits in your arteries won't magically melt away, says Dr. Golden, but your body will be able to deal with the problem better, and you'll be preventing future build-ups. “It's easier to stay out of trouble than it is to get out of trouble,” he says.

To learn more about vascular disease, speak with your primary care provider.



*Veteran Arthur Thomson undergoing a carotid duplex ultrasound.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILADELPHIA VA MEDICAL CENTER



## Center Provides Help and Hope for Those with Parkinson's Disease

**S**tate-of-the-art care for veterans with Parkinson's disease and movement disorders such as tremor and Huntington's disease is available at the Parkinson's Disease Research, Education, and Clinical Center (PADRECC) at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center.

Proudly affiliated with the University of Pennsylvania's Parkinson's Disease and Movement Disorder Center at Pennsylvania Hospital, the PADRECC's primary mission is to provide care for those with chronic progressive movement disorders. According to John Duda, M.D., co-director of the PADRECC, a team of health care providers – led by internationally renowned Parkinson's disease expert, Dr.

Matthew Stern – treats patients with a comprehensive approach to the management of these diseases.

In addition to its primary mission, the Center was established to conduct leading-edge research into the diagnosis, treatment, and cure of Parkinson's disease and to educate patients, caregivers, and health care providers about movement disorders.

Currently, the Center is involved in a study to learn more about the effect of deep brain stimulation on the symptoms of Parkinson's disease. The findings of the research, which will continue for the next three years, will guide the management of patients with the disease for years to come.

Veterans who have been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease or who are experiencing symptoms that could be related to a movement

disorder are encouraged to contact the PADRECC toll-free at 888-959-2323 to learn more.



*John Duda, MD examines veteran Ralph Romano.*

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILADELPHIA VA MEDICAL CENTER

## VA's New Care Coordination/Home Telehealth Program Now Underway

**A** new form of help is here for veterans at high risk of being hospitalized or needing long-term care because of high blood pressure, congestive heart failure (CHF), diabetes, chronic obstructive pulmonary disorder, or depression. The Care Coordination/Home Telehealth Program is now underway in all ten medical centers of the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network. The program provides veterans with monitoring equipment in their homes and care coordinators at the medical centers to help them with the day-to-day challenges posed by one or more of these five diseases.

According to Elizabeth Helsel, the Network's program manager for Care Coordination/Home Telehealth, a monitoring device about the size of a small telephone is placed in the patient's home. At a pre-arranged time, the device prompts the veteran to begin the telehealth session.

For example, a patient with CHF might be asked, "Did you weigh yourself today?" If not, the patient will then weigh him or herself and input the information into the device. The data is then transmitted to the care coordinator at the medical center. If, for instance, the veteran has gained a couple of pounds (which could signal

fluid retention and potential trouble), the device alerts the coordinator. Depending on the circumstances, the coordinator may consult with the veteran's primary care team to address the problem and then call the patient with instructions on what action to take. This timely sharing of information helps the veteran avoid life-threatening complications that could lead to hospitalization.

Helsel says an additional benefit to the program is that the patient becomes more aware of his or her condition and learns what actions might make it worse. "The care coordinator can give the patient (and any caregivers involved) immediate feedback on what may have caused a problem," she says.

Tammy Wessner, RN, care coordinator at the Lebanon VA Medical Center, and Tom Patts, physician's assistant and care coordinator at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center, say veterans in the program are happy to know they have an easy link to their primary care providers and that some of their health care needs can be met without leaving their homes.

If you have had difficulty managing one of the five diseases mentioned above and feel you may be a candidate for the Care Coordination/Home Telehealth Program, contact your primary care provider.

# A GIVING SPIRIT

**M**aybe it's because of his experiences during his adventurous youth, or maybe it's just that he is truly a "people person." Whatever his reasons, veteran Benjamin Narin (he shortened the family name, which was Narinsky) has volunteered his time, energy, and money to hundreds of people in the Philadelphia area over the past 27 years and his selfless acts won't soon be forgotten.

Currently under medical care, 90-year-old Narin possesses such a giving spirit that his daughter Paula Gart wanted to share her memories of this *Vital Veteran's* contributions. Growing up, Gart remembers her father being involved with charitable organizations and helping others. "He always cared about helping people. He was very, very generous," she says.

When he was 15, Narin joined the U.S. Merchant Marine, sailing around the world and eventually serving his country as a Mariner during World War II. In 1944, at age 30, he settled into a job at the newspaper, *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, married, and started a family.

After he retired at age 62, Narin devoted himself to volunteering, typically spending around eight hours each day driving people to doctor's appointments, visiting the sick in the hospital, serving as a chaplain of the Disabled American Veterans, raising money for charity, and doing anything he could to help the sick, elderly, and needy.

## Vital VETERAN



*Vital Veteran Benjamin Narin addresses fellow members of the Steuben Lodge of the Knights of Pythias.*

"He put other people first," remembers Gart. "He would sit for hours with someone at the doctor's office. He has visited people in every hospital in the area." Calls would come during the middle of the night, dinners would go uneaten -- none of that mattered to Narin if a friend, or even a stranger, needed

help. Gart says that eventually one of the organizations her father belongs to -- the Steuben Lodge of the Knights of Pythias -- installed an extra telephone line in the Narin home because of the great number of calls for assistance he received each day.

In 1993 after his wife Ethel passed away, Narin began to do even more for others to help overcome his grief. Gart remembers her father saying, "If you help other people, you don't worry so much about yourself."

Then, two years ago, Narin began to experience serious health problems. But that didn't stop him from helping others; it merely slowed him down. Because getting around to visit people became difficult,

Gart says her father would call them instead. "He had a list of about 50 people that he would call daily to encourage," she says.

Today many of those to whom Narin lent a helping hand are calling his daughter to offer their encouragement and prayers for her father, who once said of his commitment to helping others, "When I do something to help someone, it gives me a tremendous feeling of satisfaction. I personally feel better for doing it."

*Do you know a veteran who, after returning from the service, has continued to make an important contribution to the lives of others, his or her community, or our country (e.g., in the fields of science, medicine, the arts, etc.)? If so, please write and tell us about this Vital Veteran. Please include a paragraph telling us why you are nominating this*

*veteran. Include specific instances of what he or she is doing to better the lives of others. Be sure to include your address and telephone number in case we need to reach you.*

### Mail to:

**"Vital Veteran"**  
**VA Stars & Stripes**  
**Healthcare Network**  
**Delafield Road**  
**Pittsburgh, PA 15240**

## Veterans Update

# NEWS YOU CAN USE

### Transitional Housing Program for Women Vets/75th Anniversary at Coatesville VAMC

Coatesville VAMC recently opened a 30-bed transitional housing program for female veterans. (See article/photo, page 2.) Additionally, Veterans Week 2005 (beginning November 4) will mark the VAMC's 75th anniversary. Plans to commemorate the event include a VSO (veterans service organization) social, an employee picnic involving Coatesville VAMC retirees, and the publication of a 75th anniversary commemorative booklet.

### Erie VAMC Opens Two New Outpatient Clinics, One with Butler VAMC

Two outpatient clinics have opened in northwestern Pennsylvania: one in Warren County, the other in Venango County. Primary health care services are available at both clinics to veterans served by the Erie VAMC. At the clinic in Venango County, primary care is also available to veterans served by the Butler VAMC. For information, please call 814-723-9763 (Warren) or 814-677-7591 (Venango).

### Five Inpatient Units Undergo Major Renovation at Lebanon VAMC

The Lebanon VAMC is pleased to announce that major renovation of five inpatient units has been completed. The modern décor has improved the environment, patient privacy, and safety. State-of-the-art equipment will enhance the quality of patient care and staff efficiencies. This is the first major improvement to these units since their construction in 1947.

## SERVING YOU

Here's one good reason to get to know the facilities that make up the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network: **You are our top priority!** Dedicated to serving veterans living in Pennsylvania, Delaware, and areas of West Virginia, Ohio, New Jersey, and New York, the Network offers comprehensive services ranging from preventive screenings and checkups to long-term care. At our 10 medical centers and over 40 freestanding outpatient clinics, teams of skilled health care professionals - including specialists in substance abuse, prosthetics, and post-traumatic stress disorder - are committed to your health and well being.

### VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

### Philadelphia VAMC's Outpatient Clinic in Gloucester County, New Jersey Now Open 5 Days a Week

There's good news for veterans served by the Gloucester County, N.J. community-based outpatient clinic: the clinic is now open five days a week. The clinic-- which opened five years ago as a half-day per week operation-- is staffed with two doctors, several nurses, a social worker, and a patient services assistant.

### VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System Opens New Outpatient Clinic in Uniontown, Pa.

The VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System opened its fifth community-based outpatient clinic on March 7, 2005. VAPHS completely renovated a 3,600-square-foot facility to serve an anticipated 1,800 veterans in the first year alone. This CBOC will offer primary care, and general outpatient care including lab and pharmacy, podiatry, nutrition counseling, non-invasive radiology, and women's, behavioral, and preventive health and education services.

### VA Reaches out to Homeless Veterans

More than 200,000 of our nation's veterans are homeless, living on the streets, in shelters, or without assured housing, according to VA studies.

VA is the only federal agency that offers substantial hands-on assistance to homeless people. VA provides homeless veterans with health care, domiciliary care, transitional housing, and financial benefits. VA also works with hundreds of public, private, non-profit, and faith-based groups to provide other services.

What can you do to help a homeless vet? Here are some ideas:

- ★ Volunteer at a homeless shelter or during a "Stand Down" event.
- ★ Help out at a soup kitchen or transitional housing program.
- ★ Volunteer to tutor or teach a basic skills training class.
- ★ Become a volunteer at a VA domiciliary serving homeless veterans.
- ★ Organize a clothes drive.
- ★ Become familiar with homeless services in your area so you can provide referrals.

Please visit the VA Web site for more information on homelessness at [www.va.gov/homeless](http://www.va.gov/homeless)

*For more details on these and other VA health care developments, please visit our Web site or call your nearest VA medical center. (See back cover for telephone numbers.)*



## The Latest Information for Veterans on Our Web Site

**A**ny time you need it, you can find accurate and timely news and information for veterans by visiting the VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Web site at [www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov](http://www.starsandstripes.med.va.gov)

### Recent updates to the site include:

- links to VA's updated booklet on health care enrollment, "VA Health Care Overview," and the Spanish translation of many VA benefits guides (on the "What's New!" page);
- "Key Facts," a document that provides a brief summary of our network's workload and other information; and
- an overview of research currently taking place at the Network's medical centers.

If you don't have access to the Internet at home or at the home of family or friends, check with your local library. Many libraries offer Internet access free-of-charge to the public.

## VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network Medical Centers

### ALTOONA - James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center

2907 Pleasant Valley Blvd • Altoona, PA 16602-4377  
(814) 943-8164 or 1-877-626-2500 (toll free)

### BUTLER VA Medical Center

325 New Castle Road • Butler, PA 16001  
(724) 287-4781 or 1-800-362-8262  
[www.va.gov/butlerva](http://www.va.gov/butlerva)

### CLARKSBURG - Louis A. Johnson VA Medical Center

One Medical Center Drive • Clarksburg, WV 26301  
(304) 623-3461 or 1-800-733-0512

### COATESVILLE VA Medical Center

1400 Black Horse Hill Rd • Coatesville, PA 19320-2096  
(610) 384-7711 or 1-800-290-6172  
[www.coatesville.med.va.gov](http://www.coatesville.med.va.gov)

### ERIE VA Medical Center

135 East 38 Street • Erie, PA 16504  
(814) 868-8661 or 1-800-274-8387

### LEBANON VA Medical Center

1700 South Lincoln Ave. • Lebanon, PA 17042  
(717) 272-6621 or 1-800-409-8771

### PHILADELPHIA VA Medical Center

3900 Woodland Avenue  
Philadelphia, PA 19104  
(215) 823-5800 or 1-800-949-1001

### PITTSBURGH - VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System

**1-866-4VAPITT or 1-866-482-7488**  
**University Drive Division**  
University Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15240  
**Highland Drive Division**  
7180 Highland Drive • Pittsburgh, PA 15206  
**H. John Heinz, III Progressive Care Center**  
Delafield Road • Pittsburgh, PA 15240  
[www.va.gov/pittsburgh](http://www.va.gov/pittsburgh)

### WILKES-BARRE VA Medical Center

1111 East End Boulevard • Wilkes-Barre, PA 18711  
(570) 824-3521 or 1-877-928-2621 (toll free)  
[www.va.gov/vamcwb](http://www.va.gov/vamcwb)

### WILMINGTON VA Medical Center

1601 Kirkwood Highway • Wilmington, DE 19805  
(302) 994-2511 or 1-800-461-8262

## TIPS to Reduce the Risk of Colorectal Cancer

**C**olorectal cancer, a disease in which there is an abnormal or uncontrolled growth of cells in the large intestine, is the second leading cause of cancer-related death in the United States for both men and women combined.

Tips that may help to reduce the risk of developing colorectal cancer:

- ✓ Eat a diet rich in fruits, vegetables, and whole grains. Consuming Vitamin D, calcium, fiber, and folate may be a low-risk way of reducing the risk of colorectal cancer, according to a 2003 VA study.
- ✓ Exercise regularly.
- ✓ Maintain a healthy weight.
- ✓ Avoid smoking.
- ✓ Limit alcohol use.

For more information on colorectal cancer, please contact your local VA medical center or visit [www.vaprevention.com](http://www.vaprevention.com)



## VA Stars & Stripes Healthcare Network

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